

Inventing an Indian Slave Conspiracy on Nantucket, 1738

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ABSTRACT In 1738 British colonists on Nantucket accused their Wampanoag neighbors of plotting to rise in violent rebellion. The colonists quickly discovered the rumor was false, but their retraction did not stop newspaper printers in Boston from creating a sensational story of Indian conspiracy that quickly spread throughout the British Empire, circling the Atlantic from New England to London. In the earliest version of the report, the Boston printer Thomas Draper relied on conventions from his previous stories of slave conspiracy to invent a sensational account of an imminent Indian uprising. Most printers copied his first account of the conspiracy. Examining the Nantucket Indian conspiracy of 1738 illuminates the process by which early American printers altered and even manufactured stories of conspiracy on the basis of conventions established over years of reporting slave unrest. Historians have long relied on newspaper accounts for evidence of subaltern rebellion in the Atlantic world. This case study challenges scholars to reevaluate the process by which printers created news of conspiracy during a formative period in the history of the early American press.

On Nantucket in the fall of 1738, an intoxicated Wampanoag woman threatened a group of Englishmen. She claimed her Native people would soon rise up and murder the New England colonists who had subjugated her kin.¹ The English believed her. They passed the story from neighbor to neighbor and through the coastal villages of whalers along the Atlantic

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1. *Boston Gazette*, October 9–16, 1738, 3.

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shore. The story changed in the telling. By dusk English town elders had called in the local men, announcing that the Wampanoags had “prepared all the means they could muster and would make an attack that night.”² One English child remembered the terror of the news for the rest of her life. She recalled her mother clutching her close as they crowded into a fortified house alongside their neighbors. Her father took up his musket and marched into the dark to head off the Wampanoag threat.³ Perhaps as many as fifty armed men crept along “several different ways through fogs, [and] darkness,” determined to surprise the Indians before they could set fire to homes.⁴ The English discovered no enemy in the night, and when they pushed on to a Native village, they found no bloodthirsty Indians sharpening their knives. The Wampanoags were asleep, “and all was still, and not the least indication of any disturbance.”⁵ The Nantucket men returned to their own villages in the morning light, weapons still in hand, and wondered at the false rumor that had swept through their island.⁶

2. Eliza Mitchell provided a local historian with an oral history of the Nantucket conspiracy in 1895. She remembered hearing the story as an eight-year-old child from an elderly woman who lived through the event in 1738. The transcribed oral history is held at the Nantucket History Society; “Personal Reminiscences of Mrs. Eliza W. Mitchell,” MS23, 1895, Nantucket Historical Society (hereafter cited as NHS).

3. Ibid.

4. Obed Macy provides the number of fifty militiamen in *The History of Nantucket: Being a Compendious Account of the First Settlement on the Island by the English, Together with the Rise and Progress of the Whale Fishery and Other Historical Facts Relative to the Island and Its Inhabitants* (Boston: Hilliard, Ray, 1835), 48.

5. Mitchell, “Personal Reminiscences,” NHS.

6. The Nantucket Indian conspiracy has received little attention from American Indian historians, but several scholars of Nantucket have discussed the incident in their histories of the island. See Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 47–48; Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery: From Its Earliest Inception to the Year 1876* (Waltham, Mass.: Published by the Author, 1878), 24; Nathaniel Philbrick, “The Whipping Post,” *Historic Nantucket* 43, no. 4 (1996): 105–7; Nathaniel Philbrick, *Abram’s Eyes: The Native American Legacy of Nantucket Island* (Nantucket: Mill Hill Press, 1998), 175; Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602–1890* (1994; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 124; Andrew Lipman notes the retraction of the Nantucket conspiracy in *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Context for the American Coast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 230. Peter Mancall cites the *Pennsylvania Gazette’s* account of the intoxicated Indian woman in a footnote, though he describes the event as taking place on Martha’s Vineyard; Peter C. Mancall, *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 196n6. Historians of slave unrest have also noted the conspiracy. Jill Lepore comments on

Nantucket's conspiracy rumor would have passed into local lore if not for the newspaper men of Boston. In the skilled hands of the printer John Draper, the Nantucket conspiracy became an opportunity to tell a sensational story of servile rebellion. In the late 1730s the New England frontier had not seen war between English and Indian for more than a decade.⁷ Instead, Boston's printers had crowded their newspapers with accounts of black slave unrest in the colonial plantations of the North Atlantic. Borrowing from stories of slave plotting in previous editions of his *Boston News-Letter*, Draper fashioned an account of the Nantucket conspiracy that depicted an imminent rebellion. It had been prevented by "one good Indian fellow," a loyal Indian who had betrayed his fellow plotters.⁸ Draper's printed account took off. Within a week, his rivals in Boston had copied his version of the conspiracy verbatim. Within two weeks, two other printers, John Peter Zenger in New York City and Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, had done the same. Over the course of the next three months, British sailors and printers spread Draper's report of an impending uprising on Nantucket more than thirty-five hundred miles, to newspapers in London and the British Isles.

A single episode can sometimes reveal a great deal about the past. The story of the Nantucket conspiracy demonstrates that early American newspaper printers manufactured and disseminated false reports of plotting in the first half of the eighteenth century. Historians of slavery have long relied on early newspaper accounts for evidence of subaltern unrest in the Atlantic world.⁹ In some cases, newspapers are the only extant evidence of episodes

the retraction of the Nantucket story as an example of a false conspiracy scare in her study of the New York conspiracy of 1741; Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 55; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 193.

7. For violence between colonists and Indians along the New England frontier in this era, see Mathew Bahar, "People of the Dawn, People of the Door: Indian Pirates and the Violent Theft of an Atlantic World," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (2014): 401–26. For a broad history of conflict between colonists and Indians that treats with this period, see Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. 151–74.

8. *Boston News-Letter*, September 28–October 5, 1738, 2.

9. For historians' use of eighteenth-century newspaper accounts of slave plotting, see Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1983), 178–93; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 309–15; Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in*

of plotting from these years.¹⁰ The Nantucket conspiracy serves as a warning to all of us who rely on these printed stories. It illuminates how early American printers transformed the fearful rumors of colonists into sensational news and, in the process, created conventions for reporting slave unrest during a formative period in the history of the early American press.¹¹ The Nantucket Indians were not slaves—though British courts had forced many Native whalers into bondage—and the English on Nantucket disavowed the rumor of a Native conspiracy after their panic had subsided. Yet in the hands of the printers of the British Atlantic Empire, the exaggerated fears of Nantucket's colonists became part of a much larger story of widespread unrest in the Atlantic world.



Nantucket was not a likely place for Indian war. The island lies a half day's sail from Boston Harbor and thirty-eight miles south of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In 1738 at least twelve hundred British colonists, who called themselves English, shared the island with six hundred Wampanoags.¹² The two peoples had lived in peace for more than ninety years. During King

New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 89–91; Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 176–78; Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014) 211, 220–22. Lepore has a long footnote in which she examines the provenance of newspaper accounts concerning the execution of the convicted slave Will in New York; Lepore, *New York Burning*, 192–97, 304n12.

10. Two examples of unconfirmed insurrections and conspiracies reported in North American newspapers come from 1733 and 1734. These include the unsubstantiated report of a black slave insurrection on the island of Saint Christopher in 1733 and the New Jersey slave conspiracy of 1734. *Boston News-Letter*, February 28–March 7, 1734, 2; *New York Gazette*, March 18–25, 1734, 1.

11. This study of a false conspiracy is predicated on the idea that historians can learn a great deal from “fictive events.” See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3.

12. These population figures are estimates based on contemporary records. Nantucket's English population expanded from 300 colonists in 1700 to 917 in 1726, to 3,220 colonists by 1764. The Indian population declined from 800 in 1700 to 358 by 1763. For English and Indian population estimates on Nantucket, see Edward Byers, *The Nation of Nantucket: Society and Politics in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660–1820* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 329, table 1.

Philip's War of 1675 and 1676—the defining conflict between American Indians and New England colonists in the late seventeenth century—Nantucket's Native people had refused to attack their English neighbors. They had halted tribute payments to the mainland Wampanoag Sachem Metacom and avoided the war that engulfed the region.¹³ For their part, the colonists on the island had shown no penchant for fighting American Indians. Many of the Nantucket English were Quakers, a denomination with a tradition of peaceful relations with indigenous people.¹⁴ Why did the English believe the Indians were preparing a murderous attack on their homes?

The colonists' fears of an uprising originated in the debt peonage they forced on Nantucket's Native people. Increasingly in the first half of the eighteenth century, the English took advantage of the Wampanoags' poverty and indebtedness to coerce Native people into labor aboard deep-sea whaling vessels. European encroachment on Native lands undermined the traditional economy, and intensive coastal fishing and hunting devastated Nantucket's right-whale fishery. British merchants extended Indians credit they could not repay, and colonial courts forced Native people into bondage for their debts. Whaling merchants bought Wampanoag debtors at bargain rates and pressed them into dangerous labor at sea with little recourse under the colonial government. By 1738 the English had come to fear the wrath of the Native people they had forced into bondage.¹⁵

13. Nantucket Record Book 1, 1659–1720, October 10, 1665, as cited in Byers, *The Nation of Nantucket*, 67–68. For a discussion of the complex tribute negotiations and political alliances in the years before King Philip's War, see Julie A. Fisher and David J. Silverman, *Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts: Diplomacy, War, and the Balance of Power in Seventeenth-century New England and Indian Country* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 100–128.

14. The Congregationalist Nathan Prince noted that Quakers were “by far the prevailing sect” when he visited the island in 1722; Byers, *Nation of Nantucket*, 104. William Pencak and Daniel K. Richter, *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

15. Daniel Vickers's study of the development of Native debt peonage on Nantucket remains the most influential essay on a topic of great interest to scholars of colonial New England. Though the archaeologist Elizabeth Alden Little challenged Vickers's conclusions by arguing that Wampanoags still held considerable autonomy in their choice to go whaling, most historians have accepted that colonists imposed a cycle of debt, court conviction, and servitude on Native whalers by the second quarter of the eighteenth century. Daniel Vickers, “The First Whalers of Nantucket,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1983): 560–83; Daniel R. Mandell, *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth-century Eastern Massachusetts* (Lincoln:

Colonists who exploited Native laborers could easily imagine an Indian rebellion. Stories of servile conspiracy—the secret plan of a group of oppressed people to obtain their liberty by force—emerged throughout the Americas in places where colonists oppressed subaltern peoples.¹⁶ Europeans justified the subjection of Indians and people of African ancestry by

University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 62; Mark A. Nicholas, “Mashpee Wampanoags of Cape Cod, the Whalefishery, and Seafaring’s Impact on Community Development,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2002): 169–70; David Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries: Colonists, Christianity, and Community among the Wampanoag Indians of Martha’s Vineyard, 1600–1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 187–89; Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 223–24; Nancy Shoemaker, ed., *Living with Whales: Documents and Oral Histories of Native New England Whaling History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 48–49; Kelly K. Chaves, “Before the First Whalers: The Emergence and Loss of Indigenous Maritime Autonomy in New England, 1672–1740,” *New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014): 46–71; Lipman, *Saltwater Frontier*, 229–31; Elizabeth A. Little, “Probate Records of the Nantucket Indians,” *Nantucket Algonquian Studies* 2 (1980): 12.

16. English legal precedents held conspiracy as an agreement between two or more people to commit a crime. In 1641 Massachusetts was the first English colony in the Americas to pass an act making conspiracy unlawful. Following the early example of Barbados, many British colonial legislatures created a legal category for slave conspiracies in the early eighteenth century, specifying punishments for Indians or black slaves who plotted to escape or rebel. Virginia, for example, passed a law in 1723 that defined conspiracy as six or more slaves who “consult, advise, or conspire, to rebel or make insurrection, or . . . plot or conspire the murder of any person or persons.” In practice, the British charged most slave conspirators with the old English crime of “petit treason,” or an attempt by a servant to murder his or her master or master’s family. Because the colonial courts relied on interrogations and torture to produce confessions, historians have tried to create a definition of slave conspiracy that reflects the ambiguity of the actual existence of a plot. Thomas Davis closely follows the contemporary British definition of a slave conspiracy, defining it as a “completed crime; it is complete when two or more persons agree to do an illegal act or even to do a legal act by illegal means.” Most recently, Jason Sharples defined the discovery of a conspiracy as the “creation of official knowledge about an alleged plan for insurrection.” In the case of the Nantucket conspiracy, the rumor of revolt developed independently from authorities. For the English legal precedent, see Joshua Dressler, *Understanding Criminal Law*, 2nd ed. (New York: Matthew Bender/Irwin, 1995), chap. 29; Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime, and Colonial Law* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 24–25; “An Act for the Governing of Negroes,” *The Laws of Barbados Collected in One Volume by William Rawlin, of the Middle-Temple, London, Esquire, and Now Clerk of the Assembly of the Said Island* (London: Printed for William Rawlin, 1699), 156; David Barry Gaspar, “With a Rod of Iron: Barbados Slave

imposing distinctions of race and religion, but they feared these groups might hold secret councils to coordinate rebellion.¹⁷ Because “plotting” took place away from the colonists’ view, officials relied on an informant who could reveal the clandestine conversations of servants or slaves.¹⁸ A witness’s first warning of an impending insurrection could send an entire European colonial community into a panic. These events, called conspiracy scares, emerged from the colonists’ exploitation of subaltern peoples and their fear of a secret plan of revolt.

Conspiracy scares unfolded in remarkably similar ways across colonies and over time. Colonists responded to the first warning of an imminent rebellion with public alarm and coercive trials, ending the episode with an execution to intimidate the subaltern population.¹⁹ In Virginia in 1710, a

Laws as a Model for Jamaica, South Carolina, and Antigua, 1661–1697,” in Darlene Clark Hine and Bradley J. Nicholson, eds., *Comparative Boundaries: A Comprehensive History of Black People in the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Bradley Nicholson, “Legal Borrowing and the Origins of Slave Law in the British Colonies,” *American Journal of Legal History* 38, no. 1 (1994): 52; William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619*, 13 vols. (Richmond: Franklin Press, 1809–1823), 4:126; Thomas J. Davis, “Conspiracy and Credibility: Look Who’s Talking, about What: Law Talk and Loose Talk,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2002): 168; Jason Sharples, “Discovering Slave Conspiracies: New Fears of Rebellion and Old Paradigms of Plotting in Seventeenth-century Barbados,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 811–43.

17. For the colonists’ fear of an oppressed population’s hidden “transcripts,” see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); for European colonial anxieties produced through the exploitation of Indians, see Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). On the master’s anxieties produced through slavery, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), chap. 2; María E. Martínez, “The Black Blood of New Spain: *Limpieza de Sangre*, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 479–520; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), chap. 1.

18. For the necessary role of the informant in a conspiracy trial, see Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 134–51.

19. Slave conspiracy scares followed this distinctive pattern throughout the Americas from the early sixteenth century into the late nineteenth century. Bertram Wyatt Brown noted the remarkable similarities among slave conspiracies in the U.S. South, but they unfolded in similar ways throughout the Western Hemisphere and began on the earliest plantations of New Spain and Brazil. For an excellent examination of conspiracy scares in the British Atlantic colonies, see Jason Sharples, “The

black slave named Will warned his owner of a purported conspiracy of both African and Indian slaves to rise in rebellion across eight Tidewater counties.²⁰ The planters raised the alarm and sheriffs arrested the men and women accused by the informant. British officials interrogated and coerced confessions from the enslaved prisoners, producing an account of the conspiracy tainted by the methods of the court.²¹ At the end of the trial, British magistrates ordered the convicted conspirators “drawn and quartered”; their torn body parts were displayed across the counties to intimidate the slave population.²² Episodes like that in Virginia had become a terrifying feature of British colonial life in the decades before the Nantucket conspiracy. Britons believed they had foiled plots in the West Indies and Atlantic islands and on the mainland colonies of South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and East Jersey.²³

Flames of Insurrection: Fearing Slave Conspiracy in Early America, 1670–1780” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010). For comparisons, see Ada Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Sherwin K. Bryant, *Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), chap. 4; João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes, “Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Brazil, 1791–1850,” in David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, eds., *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 284–313; Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Winthrop Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 406.

20. “Proceedings in an Investigation of an Insurrection of Negroes and Indians, Slaves, in Surry and Isle of Wight,” March 19, 1709, Colonial Papers, folder 20, no. 11, Library of Virginia (hereafter cited as LOV).

21. For slave conspiracy confessions as a product of the court, see Jason Sharples, “Hearing Whispers, Casting Shadows: Jailhouse Conversation and the Production of Knowledge during the Antigua Slave Conspiracy Investigation of 1736,” in Michele Lise Tarter and Richard J. Bell, eds., *Buried Lives: Incarcerated in Early America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 35–59; Philip D. Morgan, “Conspiracy Scares,” “Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, Part 2,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2002): 159–66.

22. H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*, 6 vols. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1925–66), 3:234–35, 242–43; Anthony S. Parent Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 152–53.

23. Before the Nantucket conspiracy of 1738, colonists relied on informants for the discovery of conspiracies in Nevis (1725), Antigua (1729, 1736), Bermuda

The Nantucket English had created the conditions for a conspiracy scare within their own community. They had refused to integrate with Native people.²⁴ During the earliest Puritan missionary efforts of the 1640s, Wampanoags in coastal Massachusetts told the Congregationalist John Eliot “in 40 yeers more, some Indians would all be one English, and in a hundred yeers, all Indians here about would so bee.”²⁵ But ninety years later the English on Nantucket still held their religious meetings in their own homes, away from Native Christian congregations.²⁶ The colonists’ language for Native people conveyed their sense of superiority. Nantucket officials referred to themselves as “Christians” even as they called Protestant Wampanoags “praying Indians” and sometimes “heathens.” Though Indians adopted English clothes and husbandry, worked on whaling vessels, and shared an island only thirteen miles long, the colonists resisted integration. The British on Nantucket and throughout the Northeast forced praying Indians into a racial hierarchy in which they refused to treat Native people as equals.²⁷

The experience of disease divided colonists and Indians as well. Nantucket Wampanoags had less immunity to the pathogens unintentionally introduced by the English. Epidemics wrought terrible suffering on Native

(1730), Saint Christopher (1734), and the Bahamas (1734). On the mainland, British officials relied on informants for the discovery of slave conspiracies in Virginia (1710, 1723), South Carolina (1730, 1736), East Jersey (1734), and Maryland (1738). For a list of conspiracies in the Caribbean, see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 335–39; for Bermuda, see Clarence V. H. Maxwell, “‘The Horrid Villainy’: Sarah Bassett and the Poisoning Conspiracies in Bermuda, 1727–1730,” *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 3 (2000): 48–74; for the mainland, see Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 168–87.

24. Native missionaries from Martha’s Vineyard first arrived on Nantucket in the late 1640s. In 1673 ninety Indian families were members of a recognized church congregation on the island. Lloyd C. M. Hare, *Thomas Mayhew: Patriarch to the Indians, 1593–1682* (New York: D. Appleton, 1932), chap. 3; Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 73.

25. Thomas Shepard, *The Clear Sunshine of the Gospel Breaking Forth upon the Indians in New-England* (London: R. Cotes, 1648), 17 (copy in the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University).

26. Byers, *The Nation of Nantucket*, 52–53.

27. Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 186–87; David Silverman, *Red Brethren: The Brothertown and Stockbridge Indians and the Problem of Race in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 16–17, 25; Newell, *Brethren by Nature*, 229–34.

people.²⁸ Though as many as two thousand Indians may have lived on Nantucket in 1640, only eight hundred Wampanoags survived into the eighteenth century.²⁹ “Their Decay is great, Chiefly in Number,” wrote John Gardner from the island in 1694.³⁰ The proximity of English settlement spread new pathogens over time. In early January 1738, the *Boston Evening Post* reported that a “Distemper” had taken hold of the island, killing Indians in yet another wave of disease.³¹

While the Native population suffered and declined, the colonists grew in number. From 1700 to 1726 the British population expanded from 300 to 917, tripling within a generation. Most English families raised five or more children on the island in these years.³² Through natural increase and migration, the colonists maintained this rate of growth through the eighteenth century, reaching 3,220 people by 1764 and 4,620 by 1790.³³ They first settled in homesteads allowed by the proprietary government and let their sheep and cattle roam the pasturage held in common. In 1717 the English designated twenty-seven new house lots inside the mouth of Nantucket harbor—along the northern coast of the island—and quickly began to build on the site.³⁴ By the time of the conspiracy, most English still lived on small farms but looked toward the village in the harbor as a new center for shipping and news.

This colonial settlement decimated the Native economy and created deep tensions over trespass and pasturage. English herds of sheep and pigs intensified competition for land and threatened the Native food supply. As early as 1660 Englishmen were careful to include in their written deeds the right to allow their livestock free grazing between October and May, when fallow Indian cornfields offered opportunities for good pasturage.³⁵ These English

28. For the effects of disease on New England populations, see Dean R. Snow and Kim M. Lanphear, “European Contact and Indian Depopulation in the Northeast: The Timing of the First Epidemics,” *Ethnohistory* 35, no. 1 (2008): 15–33; Kathleen J. Bragdon, *Native People of Southern New England, 1500–1650* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 25–28.

29. Byers, *The Nation of Nantucket*, 329.

30. John Gardner to Matthew Mayhew, May 17, 1694, as quoted in Matthew Mayhew, *The Conquests and Triumphs of Grace* (London, 1695), 35.

31. *Boston Evening Post*, January 1, 1738.

32. Byers, *Nation of Nantucket*, 92.

33. *Ibid.*, 329, 252–53.

34. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

35. Alexander Starbuck, *The History of Nantucket: County, Island and Town* (Boston: Goodspeed, 1924), 125, 140.

herds roamed at will through Native hunting grounds and the salt marshes of the island, ruining the important Native food base of edible plants and shellfish.³⁶ Wampanoag threats against the livestock prompted the English to defend their herds aggressively. A law passed on May 10, 1663, stated that if any Indian hunted or “disturbed” cattle on a town common, he would be arrested and fined.³⁷ The English shot Indian dogs that came to close to their herds and prosecuted their Wampanoag neighbors for missing sheep or injured cattle.³⁸ The English trespassed on Native lands and passed laws that prevented Indian retaliation.

The Wampanoags’ adoption of their own herds of cattle and horses only inspired English resentment. Nantucket settlers first banned the sale of livestock to Indians in 1669 in an attempt to prevent competition for pasturage. When the Wampanoag sachems insisted on their right to have herds on the island, the English negotiated a settlement in which Indians would raise only a certain number of horses or sheep that was based on the acreage owned by Native people. The colonists then passed laws granting their authorities the right to cull Wampanoag herds.³⁹ By the early eighteenth century Nantucket settlers were capturing and killing Indian livestock, according to their own council. Before the local magistrates, Wampanoag sachems complained bitterly that settlers “took away their horses and cattle” and charged fines “near as much as the creatures were worth” to the owners of the animals.⁴⁰ In 1712 the sachems complained to the Massachusetts General Court in hopes that the province might intervene to stop the culling of their herds. British officials offered little assistance.⁴¹ While these tensions over livestock and pasturage grew on the island, colonists and Indians engaged in a greater struggle at sea.

Nantucket whaling began along the beaches of the island’s south coast.

36. David J. Silverman, “‘We chuse to be bounded’: Native American Animal Husbandry in Colonial New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2003): 527.

37. County of Nantucket, Records, vol. 1, 1664–1764, Registry of Deeds, Town and County Building, Nantucket, p. 101, May 10, 1663.

38. Silverman, “‘We chuse to be bounded,’” 528.

39. *Ibid.*, 528–30.

40. County of Nantucket, Records, vol. 1, 1664–1764, Registry of Deeds, Town and County Building, Nantucket, p. 113, n.d.

41. *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay*, 21 vols. (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1869–1922), 10:289, 438, 436; 11:56; 14:11.

A Wampanoag lookout would stand atop a mast buried in the sand, blinking back the salt air as he gazed away offshore.⁴² The object of his search was the right whale, a slow-moving species that migrated between Cape Cod and the Carolinas from November to April.⁴³ When the lookout saw a spout burst above the waves, he cried, "Pawana!" (whale), and the crew of Indians raced from their wetus (birchbark huts) into whaleboats lying on the sand.⁴⁴ An Englishman might serve as steersman, but Wampanoags pulled the oars and held the harpoon as they closed in alongside the whale.⁴⁵ The harpooner hurled his weapon, and, if the strike was true, the stricken animal pulled the line taut as it sought to escape its hunters. "A soon as it is wounded, he makes all foam, with his rapid violent Course," wrote an English observer in 1680, "so if they be not very quick . . . it's a hundred to one he over-sets the Boat."⁴⁶ The lancer killed the whale by stabbing through its rib cage and into the heart, the great leviathan thrashing in foam and blood. The crew pulled against the oars and towed the animal back to the south coast beaches, where Native workers boiled fat down to oil in the try yards (processing areas) there.

By 1738 the Nantucket English had been employing Wampanoag labor aboard whaling ships for nearly half a century, but this relationship began with Native cod fishing. During the first generation of colonial settlement on the island, the Wampanoags accelerated their coastal fin fishing to exchange their catch for English trade goods. Nantucket Indians purchased manufactures on credit at the beginning of the season, and most managed to pay off their small debts with cod over the course of the year.⁴⁷ In 1690 Nantucket settlers invited a mainlander, Ichabod Paddock, to introduce the island to hunting right whales.⁴⁸ The Wampanoags excelled at whaling off the Nantucket coast. The English continued their practice of providing Native hunters with vessels and credit, and the Indians expected to pay their debt with their share of profits from the oil, called the lay. Rowing on boats was dangerous and difficult, but the promise of a lay worth seventeen

42. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London, 1782), 100.

43. Byers, *Nation of Nantucket*, 79; Vickers, "First Whalemen," 562.

44. Philbrick, *Abram's Eyes*, 151–53.

45. Vickers, "First Whalemen," 568.

46. Charles Wolley, *A Two Years Journal in New-York: And Part of Its Territories in America* (London, 1701), 24–25.

47. Chaves, "Before the First Whalemen," 58–59.

48. Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery*, 10, 16–17.

pounds sterling (seven barrels of oil and fifty-four pounds of bone) encouraged Native people to risk the hunt.⁴⁹ The English expanded their enterprise, and the Wampanoags entered the maritime trade in earnest, buying European clothes and spinning wheels, livestock and gunpowder.⁵⁰

The Nantucket trade in whale oil pushed the island into the burgeoning Atlantic economy of the eighteenth-century British Empire. The number of British ships crossing the Atlantic tripled in these years, carrying manufactured trade goods to a New England population that grew from 92,000 people at the opening of the century to 290,000 by 1738.⁵¹ Demand for whale oil in the British Isles drove prices from eight pounds sterling per barrel in 1725 to thirteen by the middle of the century.⁵² New England colonists exchanged commodities such as fish, fur, lumber, and, increasingly, whale oil across the Atlantic in a carrying trade protected by the laws of navigation.⁵³ "You will find good encouragement in the whale fishery," wrote the Boston merchant Thomas Amory to England in 1728, "many here and at Nantucket are engaged in it and there is a great deal of money made in it."⁵⁴ Leading Nantucket families partnered with mainland merchants to purchase vessels. Between 1715 and 1730 whaleship owners increased the number of deepwater vessels on the island fourfold.⁵⁵

This colonial expansion of maritime hunting decimated the Nantucket

49. This specific example of a lay from coastal whaling comes from the Pigskin Book, a 1707 whaling merchant record book from Long Island. John A. Strong, "The Pigskin Book: Records of Native American Whalers, 1696–1721," *Long Island Historical Journal* 3, no. 1 (1990): 20.

50. *Ibid.*, 21; Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 191.

51. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170–71; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789, with Supplementary Bibliography* (1985; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 103, table 5.1.

52. Vickers, "First Whalers," 565.

53. For the colonists of Nantucket, the most important British trade protection was probably a law passed in 1675 that placed a nine-pound-sterling tariff on each barrel of Dutch oil; Byers, *Nation of Nantucket*, 83, 85.

54. William B. Weedon, *An Economic and Social History of New England, 1620–1789*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890), 1:441.

55. As early as 1713 nine Nantucketers owned boats registered in Boston. Nantucket families partnered with Bostonians to purchase sloops for direct trade as far south as Virginia. Merchant investment sparked the rapid expansion of the fishery; Byers, *Nation of Nantucket*, 82.

fishery.⁵⁶ The cod catch peaked as early as 1688.⁵⁷ The right whale migratory population probably numbered no more than seven thousand animals at its height.⁵⁸ Native hunters were killing hundreds a year by the opening of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ In 1716 New England whalers wrote to the London Board of Trade complaining that fisheries were “in so uncertain a condition.”⁶⁰ In 1720 the *Boston News-Letter* reported that whaling “has failed much this Winter, as it has done for several winters past.”⁶¹ The ecological devastation wrought by fishermen and hunters drove Nantucket’s leading English families to search ever farther for whales. By 1717 they were fitting out deepwater sloops in their hunt for the more valuable spermaceti. Native laborers working on these vessels could expect to spend long months at sea, away from their island home.⁶²

Wampanoag whalers had little choice about whether to join in the deep-sea hunt. Colonial settlement had eroded the Native economy, and Native whaling had wrought ecological devastation on the island’s fisheries. As a result, Indians developed a growing dependence on the English store. Nantucket whale merchant account books chronicle the change in Wampanoag purchases over time. The Starbuck family sold Indians fewer and fewer farming implements and fishing tools over the first decades of the early eighteenth century. Instead, Wampanoag whalers purchased ever larger portions of corn and meat, along with gunpowder and shot for hunting birds.⁶³ The Indians also maintained a steady preference for European-style clothing.⁶⁴ Between 1730 and 1734 an Indian named Wamon bought from John Hussey, a whaling merchant, ten shirts, seven blankets, handkerchiefs, ribbon, thread, calico, and lace, all on credit.⁶⁵ Indian men sold their labor

56. For a detailed discussion of the ecological devastation of the Nantucket coastal fishery, see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 68–72.

57. Chaves, “Before the First Whalers,” 59.

58. Lipman, *Saltwater Frontier*, 231.

59. Bolster, *The Mortal Sea*, 69–71.

60. *Documentary Records of the Colonial History of New York*, 5:59, 474–75, as quoted in Lipman, *Saltwater Frontier*, 232.

61. Quoted in Bolster, *The Mortal Sea*, 70.

62. Vickers, “First Whalers,” 565–66.

63. The growing dependence of Native whalers on the English store in New England has been noted by historians of Nantucket, Martha’s Vineyard, and Long Island. Vickers, “First Whalers,” 572; Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 191; Strong, “The Pigskin Book,” 21.

64. Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 190–92.

65. Shoemaker, *Living with Whales*, 48–49.

to merchants in exchange for food and manufactures, promising to work aboard whaling vessels and deliver their lay of bone and oil to pay their debt.⁶⁶ Whales could produce tremendous profits, and Indians could receive more credit than previous generations of Nantucket fishermen. But when the whales failed to appear, the Wampanoags still owed the merchants.

Nantucket whale merchants used the debt of Native people to secure bonded servants for the deep-sea hunt. The English had long relied on Native labor for their whaling ventures. Providing store credit to Indians allowed the whaling merchant to secure the crewmen he would need in the upcoming season. If the Indian man failed to bring back his lay of oil and bone, the merchants knew they could count on colonial courts to condemn him to an indenture. Between 1700 and 1755 the Nantucket courts tried at least sixty-seven Wampanoags for book debt, at a time when less than six hundred Native people lived on the island.⁶⁷ Many more Indian whalers negotiated their indenture with merchants to escape the certainty of jail and conviction.⁶⁸ An Indian whaler, Jonas Cooper, discovered the collusion between merchant and court when he was convicted and sentenced to a three-year indenture in 1723.⁶⁹ The Wampanoag Tom Poney took out credit with the Starbuck family for the first time in 1726 and returned with such an impressive lay of "oyl and bone" that the English whaling merchant extended him more credit. His next two deep-sea hunts failed to secure any spermaceti whales, and he continued to borrow on account, sinking into a debt that ended with the court's ordering his indenture to the Starbucks for over two years.⁷⁰ Stephen Noblee was so desperate to escape his indenture that he broke into his master's desk and tried to run away with his contract, but he was caught by Nantucket authorities and forced to serve more time aboard ship.⁷¹ By the 1730s the Wampanoag whalers were fast becoming a bonded servant class of the English settlers of Nantucket.

Debt peonage brought a new level of suffering to Nantucket's Native people. Wampanoags with unpaid debts were forced by British magistrates to surrender their land.⁷² Indian laborers, such as Nathan Sias, found themselves dragged to the Court of Common Pleas, before which they had few

66. Nicholas, "Mashpee Wampanoags of Cape Cod," 169–71.

67. Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 198–99.

68. *Ibid.*, 197–99.

69. Nantucket County, Court Records, 1721–1785, vol. 1, p. 35, Inferior Court, March 29, 1726.

70. Chaves, "Before the First Whalers," 62–63.

71. *Ibid.*, 69.

72. Vickers, "First Whalers," 572–73.

options.⁷³ They could sell what they owned or they could go to sea. While their men were away, their families and community were left to fend for themselves. Poverty and dependence drove women and children to buy necessities like food and clothing from the merchant store on the credit of their men, thus increasing the length of indenture.⁷⁴ As families grew more desperate, Indian parents bound their children to English families to pay off their debts.⁷⁵ Most of Nantucket's whaling merchants, like the Coffins and the Starbucks, kept Native children as servants in their houses.⁷⁶ "There is scarcely an Indian Boy among us not indetted to an English Master," wrote the Mashpee minister Gideon Hawley in midcentury. "An Indian having got in debt (he hardly knows how) obliges himself to go a whaling till he answers it: and because life is uncertain, his master obliges him in his Covenant or Indenture to include his Boy."⁷⁷ Children bonded to English whalers could expect to spend their entire youth in the service of their masters, either by contract or because of their parents' inability to pay off the merchants.⁷⁸ Debt peonage deprived Native people of their land and tore apart Indian families.

By 1738 the Nantucket English owned the labor of a bonded Wampanoag people. The leading whaling families controlled the most indentures and grew wealthier from the work of Indians.⁷⁹ They passed the indentures of Wampanoag whalers on to their children in the wills and inventories they left behind.⁸⁰ The historian Daniel Vickers argues that like slave societies in more southern climes, New England whaling merchants discovered that bonded Indian labor aboard whaling vessels produced more profit over time. "In the early years of whale fishery on Nantucket," he argues, "capitalism and free labor could never co-exist."⁸¹ Instead of purchasing African

73. Nantucket County, Court Records, 1721–1785, vol. 1, p. 31, Common Pleas, October 5, 1725.

74. Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 203–9; Chaves, "Before the First Whalemens," 66–67.

75. Newell, *Brethren by Nature*, 224–26; Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 203–5; Chaves, "Before the First Whalemens," 66–67.

76. Vickers, "First Whalemens," 577.

77. Gideon Hawley to Andrew Oliver, December 9, 1760, Hawley Journal, as quoted in Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 204.

78. Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries*, 203–9.

79. Vickers, "First Whalemens," 577–78.

80. *Ibid.*, 568, 577.

81. *Ibid.*, 568. Also see Margaret Newell, "The Changing Nature of Indian Slavery in New England, 1670–1730," in Colin Calloway and Neal Salisbury, eds.,

slaves, Nantucket merchants increasingly sought to bond Wampanoag Indians by exploiting their poverty and forcing them to work aboard their rapidly expanding fleet of whaling boats and vessels.

The Nantucket Indians made their grievances known to British authorities. Their petitions to the mainland General Court of Massachusetts chronicled the growing anger and frustrations of the island's indigenous people toward the English. As early as 1700 the sachems complained to the General Court that Nantucket merchants had forced Indians to be "servants for an unreasonable term" because of "some small debt contracted."⁸² In 1702 the Wampanoags insisted they could "not possibly recover our rights by law at home, both judges and jurors being all parties in the cause."⁸³ They sought to have their court cases moved to a jurisdiction away from the island to escape the collusion between merchants and local court. The General Court viewed the complaints seriously enough to pass laws limiting the length of indentures to two years. In an act addressing Indian debt within the province, Massachusetts lawmakers worried the practice of forcing Indians to be "made servants" could "prove of fatal consequence if not timely remedied."⁸⁴ But the English on the island only increased the practice of bonding Native people.

The island's Wampanoags returned to the General Court again and again, complaining bitterly about their treatment at the hands of the English. Massachusetts records from 1716 note Nantucket Indian petitioners "complaining of Great Injustice and Oppression they suffer from some of their English neighbors."⁸⁵ They returned in 1718, noting this was their "fourth complaint."⁸⁶ And their grievances grew. The "English Neighbors" allowed them "half Price for their Whaling"; "pulled down the Indian Houses & built on their Land"; "take away their Horses & Cattle to prevent their Plowing"; while in all cases "the Judges, Jury, Sheriff, & Clerk are the Defendants." Nantucket's English representative to the General Court

Reinterpreting New England Indians and the Colonial Experience (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2003), 108, 117–27.

82. *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay: To Which Are Prefixed the Charters of the Province with Historical and Explanatory Notes, and an Appendix* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1869), 1:435.

83. Starbuck, *History of Nantucket*, 141.

84. *The Acts and Resolves*, 1:641.

85. *Journal of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 51 vols. (Boston, 1919–), 1:137–38.

86. Chaves notes the Indians' exasperation at complaining for a fourth time; Chaves, "Before the First Whalemen," 69.

defended his island brethren aggressively, insisting that colonists did not steal Native herds and the Indians owed “the English a great deal, who have often trusted and relieved them in their Necessities”;⁸⁷ the court failed to halt the encroachment on Native lands and the legal bondage of Wampanoag Indians.

Through the two years before the rumor of revolt, the sufferings of the Wampanoags grew particularly acute. Widespread bondage, poverty, and sickness plagued the people of the island. The conditions were so bad, and the misfortunes so tragic, that they caught the attention of printers in Boston. In May 1737 the *New-England Weekly Journal* reported a catastrophe in the Wampanoag community, when “5 Indians going out a Fishing from thence a few Days ago, were all drowned.”⁸⁸ Native despair exploded in episodes of domestic violence, the product of an impoverished and desperate people. “We hear from Nantucket,” related the *Boston News-Letter*, “that on the 14th of last Month, an Indian Man was executed there for the Murder of his Squaw.”⁸⁹ The *Boston Evening Post* recorded “a special court and gaol Delivery was held at Nantucket, for the trial of an Indian Woman for the Murder of her Bastard Child.”⁹⁰ Sickness arrived on the heels of these tragedies. In January 1738 a new epidemic of smallpox killed half the adult Wampanoag population in the mainland coastal community of Yarmouth,⁹¹ and it was probably the same “distemper” that struck Nantucket that winter.⁹² It was but the most recent in a long list of misfortunes plaguing the Indians of the island.

Though tensions between the English and Wampanoag had been growing for generations, it was “a great many Meetings in the Night” that were the precursor to the Nantucket conspiracy scare. The colonists had noted these meetings in the late summer and early fall of 1738, which had “caus’d a deal of Uneasiness among the English inhabitants.”⁹³ The Nantucket settlers feared their Indian bondsmen were holding secret councils to coordinate rebellion. Island authorities ordered the Indians “had up and examin’d as to the Occasion of their assembling in such a manner,” and the Wampanoags explained the meetings were “concerning their going to New-York

87. Starbuck, *History of Nantucket*, 143; Chaves, “Before the First Whalemens,” 69–70.

88. *New-England Weekly Journal*, May 24, 1737.

89. *Boston News-Letter*, August 5, 1736.

90. *Boston Evening Post*, July 5, 1737.

91. *Boston News-Letter*, January 2, 1738.

92. *Boston Evening Post*, January 1, 1738.

93. *Boston Evening Post*, October 23, 1738, 2.

about their old Deeds,” an attempt to prove their ownership of lands now claimed by settlers.⁹⁴ Despite the Indians’ attempts to calm their nervous neighbors, the English feared the growing resentment of their bondsmen.

The Indians may have discussed far more in their meetings than their old land deeds. Beginning in 1741, the Wampanoags developed a petition campaign to the Massachusetts General Court that chronicled the deep-seated resentments of Native people at the time of the conspiracy scare. The English, the Indians claimed, stole Native livestock without compensation. Colonists let their own livestock loose in Indian fields, eating the corn “most all up” and then refusing to pay for “hurt their creatures done” on Indian land.⁹⁵ Crop devastation was coupled with the desperate problem of debt labor and whaling. “How can we be any ways like Christians,” the Wampanoags complained to the General Court, “when we should be praying to God on the Sabbath day morning then we must be Rowing after whal or killing whal on Sabbath day?” In their being prevented even from worshipping God, they insisted, the whaling was ruining their lives. “How can we serve God or to worship him on the Sabbath days or at any time,” they asked, “when our masters lead us to darkness and not In light?”⁹⁶

The English had indeed led the Wampanoags into darkness. They had taken advantage of the Indians’ poverty and indebtedness to coerce Native people into labor aboard deep-sea whaling vessels. The combined ecological devastation wrought by overfishing and European encroachment on Native lands decimated the Native economy. The whaling merchants forced Nantucket Wampanoags into bondage and then feared their wrath.

In this anxious environment, in September 1738 an intoxicated Wampanoag woman threatened the English with a “drunken story.”⁹⁷ There is no record of what she actually said. When she was interrogated by the authorities in the days after the mobilization of the island, the officials claimed

94. Ibid.

95. Nantucket’s Native people submitted at least nine petitions to the General Court between 1741 and 1747, after fourteen years’ absence from Massachusetts’ colonial assembly. The relative quiet between 1727 and 1741 might be explained by the influence of Sachem Benjamin Abel, who was deposed by the Wampanoags for selling Native lands to the English in 1741. The petitions are transcribed in Starbuck’s *History of Nantucket* and chronicle the long list of grievances held by Native people on the island over the decade of the 1730s; Starbuck, *History of Nantucket*, 144–56; Massachusetts Archives Series, 32:387–88, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston (hereafter cited as Mass. Archives).

96. Mass. Archives, 31:534, 542, 542a.

97. *Boston Gazette*, October 9–16, 1738, 3.

they could “make no sense of it.”⁹⁸ But the inebriated Wampanoag’s threat was enough to arouse panic among the English of Nantucket.

As colonists spread the rumor of an Indian attack across their island, sailors weighed anchor and sailed for Boston. They departed during the panic, probably in the early morning hours after the march on the Wampanoags’ village. The first published account from the mainland described an island community still with “much to be feared.”⁹⁹ The version of the rumor the sailors heard is mostly lost, but the lone extant oral history from the island described Indians making “an attack that night” and provided no other details. With the rumor running as fast as it could be carried from house to house, the mariners let the wind push their sails to the northward, launching the Nantucket scare into the Atlantic world.



Though the rumor of an impending Indian uprising began on Nantucket, British printers altered the story as they shared it through the maritime avenues of commerce. In the process, they transformed the rumor into news—noteworthy information about important events—that cast the impending uprising as another servile insurrection in the American provinces. Printers relied on the genre of slave conspiracy narratives to explain the impending attack in Nantucket. This process of manufacturing stories of rebellion and disseminating news to the far reaches of the empire had already created among white Britons a growing awareness of an impending threat from enslaved people of African ancestry.¹⁰⁰ Over the course of the next three months, Boston printers shared the anxieties of the Nantucket English with thousands of Britons on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁰¹

John Draper printed the first account of the Nantucket conspiracy in his *Boston News-Letter*. He placed the story on the second page of his weekly edition, published for the week of September 28:

98. Ibid.

99. *Boston News-Letter*, September 28–October 5, 1738, 2.

100. Early American historians have long struggled to demonstrate the influence of newspapers on the public, especially in the case of the American Revolution; Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665–1740* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 252; Stephen Botein, “‘Mere Mechanics,’ and an Open Press,” in Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, eds., *The Press and the American Revolution* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 11–58.

101. The historian Marc Bloch argued that rumors can reveal the “collective consciousness” of a people at a particular time; Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Knopf, 1953), 106–7.

We hear from Nantucket, That there has been lately a horrid Scheme contriv'd by the Indians of that Island, to set Fire to the Houses of the English Inhabitants in the Night, and then to fall upon them arm'd, and kill as many as they could: But the Execution of this vile Design was happily prevented by an honest Indian Fellow, whom they could by no means seduce to join with them in so desperate an Undertaking, but gave Timely Notice to the Inhabitants thereof, who accordingly keeping upon their Guard, the Indians have desisted. It seems these Indians have for some Time past appear'd surly and discontented; and 'tis said the above Affair was concerted last Spring, before the Vessels sail'd on the whaling Voyages; and that the Indians who went out with the English on those Voyages were in the Confederacy, and were to do their Part by destroying the English on the Seas; As several of those Vessels are not arriv'd tho' long expected; and as the greater Number in the Crews were Indians, the Consequences thereof is much to be feared.¹⁰²

This report followed conventions recognizable to an eighteenth-century reader. By opening with "We hear from Nantucket," the printer indicated he had been told the story, rather than read it, and that he would not credit his source. Colonial American printers would often begin an article by explaining the origin of a story, attributing it to the captain of a ship ("By Capt. Pico, who arrived in Philadelphia") or a literate gentleman ("Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman at Antigua").¹⁰³ But here Draper was reporting a spoken rumor provided by a person he and his readers would have held in less esteem, such as a sailor or fisherman, and because the story had no source, the printer could take tremendous liberties.¹⁰⁴

The mariners had shared their story with one of the most prolific printers in Boston. Draper was thirty-six years old in 1738 and driven in his pursuit of profits for his newspaper. He had served as an apprentice to Bartholomew Green, the most prominent printer in Boston between 1700 and 1730, and married his master's daughter.¹⁰⁵ Upon Green's death in 1732, Draper inherited his father-in-law's *Boston News-Letter* and several printing contracts from the Massachusetts government.¹⁰⁶ The young

102. *Boston News-Letter*, September 28–October 5, 1738, 2.

103. "Capt. Pico," *American Weekly Mercury*, September 26–October 3, 1734, 2; "Gentleman of Antigua," *Boston Gazette*, November 22–29, 1736, 3.

104. For a discussion of "who counted" in colonial American newspapers, see Clark, *The Public Prints*, 223–39.

105. Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, with a Biography of Printers, and an Account of Newspapers*, 2nd ed. (Albany, N.Y.: J. Munsell, 1874), 1:125.

106. Benjamin Franklin V, ed., *Boston Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers, 1640–1800* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 100–103.

master expanded the advertisements in the newspaper and increased the number of pages. He aggressively sought to expand the circulation of his public prints and introduced new publications, such as almanacs and religious texts.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, Draper developed a penchant for reporting rumors of rebellion in the British provinces that the sailors from Nantucket may have known about.

Draper drew on an old tradition of reporting Indian atrocities. After the end of King Philip's War, in 1676, the Congregationalists of Boston and London had created a body of printed work that sought to relate the savagery of Native people to readers in England.¹⁰⁸ These publications described Indians leaving towns "wholly laid in ashes" and Native enemies treating "Men, Women and Children" with "exquisite torments, and most inhumane barbarities."¹⁰⁹ A London printer even published a New England account of the war that concluded with a letter from a West Indian planter concerning a contemporary black slave conspiracy in Barbados.¹¹⁰ London readers could note that Philip's allies had set a town "on fire in three places" as part of an attack on English families, and at the back of edition, they learned that black slaves in Barbados planned to "murder all the white people" in a purported plot to rise in rebellion the same year. The Barbadian letter writer suggested New England Indians and Barbados slaves had "tasted of the same cup."¹¹¹ But this pamphlet was unique. Throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, English pamphlets and

107. *Ibid.*, 102–3.

108. For examples of this literature see Benjamin Church, *The Entertaining History of King Philip's War* (Boston, 1716); Anonymous, *A Farther Brief and True Narration of the Late Wars Risen in New-England, Occasioned by the Quarrelsome Disposition and Perfidious Carriage of the Barbarous and Savage Indian Native There . . .* (London, 1676); Increase Mather, *A Relation of the Troubles Which Have Hapned in New-England, By Reason of the Indians There: From the Year 1614 to the Year 1675 . . .* (Boston, 1677).

109. Nathaniel Saltonstall, *A New and Further Narrative of the State of New England* (London, 1676), 77.

110. [Nathaniel Saltonstall], *A Continuation of the State of New-England: Being a Farther Account of the Indian Warr . . . Together with an Account of the Intended Rebellion of the Negroes in the Barbadoes* (London, 1676), 19–20, 71–74; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 167–68; Linford D. Fisher, "Dangerous Designs: The 1676 Barbados Act to Prohibit New England Indian Slave Importation," *William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2014): 109.

111. [Saltonstall], *A Continuation of the State of New-England*, 74.

broad­sides did not usually conflate frontier war with black slave conspiracies. Printers on both sides of the Atlantic did, however, continue to depict Indian “savagery” on frontier families.¹¹²

Despite this tradition, the printers of the *Boston News-Letter* had never reported an Indian conspiracy like that on Nantucket. In the mid-1720s, when Draper was a young apprentice, his master, Bartholomew Green, published numerous accounts of Indian violence. These stories were brief and terse reports about an ongoing war between Massachusetts and the Wabanaki Indians of coastal Maine between 1723 and 1726. “We hear from Berwick,” Green related, “about 12 Indians being there, Kill’d one of our Men, Wounded a Second, and the third not to be found.”¹¹³ Even potentially sensational stories received succinct treatment. Four Indians who attempted to smash through the roof of an Oxford house in 1724 were “shot by a Woman who lay in the Loft with two Guns” all alone, and “ready to receive them.”¹¹⁴ With the end of Lord Dummer’s War in 1726, the newspaper printed far fewer accounts of Indian violence, and when Draper took over printing in the early 1730s, he confined himself to reporting treaties with Native tribes and local crimes concerning Native people.¹¹⁵ In the summer of 1738, however, two months before the Nantucket conspiracy, Draper published a detailed account of frontier violence in Virginia. Copying the story from the *Virginia Gazette* of Williamsburg, the printer related that “some Indians had lately murder’d eleven white Persons, Men, Women, and Children, who were settled far back on the Frontiers of the County,” and that the governor had sent “arm’d Men” in pursuit.¹¹⁶ But even this story bore little resemblance to his sensational treatment of the rumor from Nantucket.

Black slave conspiracies received far more attention from Draper. The

112. See Peter Silver’s discussion of the development of the “anti-Indian sublime”—a fear and hatred of Indians—in the mid-Atlantic of the middle eighteenth century; Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 83–86.

113. *Boston News-Letter*, August 13–20, 1724, 2.

114. *Boston News-Letter*, August 6–13, 1724, 2.

115. See, for example, accounts of domestic violence among Indians in *Boston News-Letter*, July 21–28, 1737, 2.

116. The previous year, Draper had also printed a similar account of a murder on the South Carolina frontier. Colonial authorities suspected neighboring Indians of the violence. For Virginia, see *Boston News-Letter*, July 20–27, 1738, 1; for South Carolina, see *Boston News-Letter*, February 24–March 3, 1737, 1.

precedent in Boston for reporting slave rebellion had been set by his former master. In 1712 John Campbell and Bartholomew Green had reported the details of a slave revolt that swept through New York city. "Some Corman-tine Negroes to the number of 25 or 30 and 2 or 3 Spanish Indians," the printers reported, "having conspired to murder all the Christians here, and by that means thinking to obtain their Freedom, about two o'clock this morning put their bloody design in Execution." The African and Indian slaves set "fire to a House," Green explained to his readers, and then "stood prepar'd with Arms to kill every body that approach'd to put it out." The colonists had rung the fire bell to raise the alarm and ran with buckets to extinguish the blaze, only to discover insurrectionists waiting with pistol and cutlass. The former slaves "barbarously murdered the following persons that were running to the fire," Green continued, listing the fifteen British men killed by the rebels.¹¹⁷ When the British caught the Africans and Indians, they burned them, in reprisals designed to be more brutal than the uprising itself.¹¹⁸ Campbell and Green were the only British newspaper printers in the American mainland colonies at the time, and their report was the only printed account there of the insurrection.¹¹⁹

In neighboring colonies to both north and south, the New York city insurrection left a lasting impression. Pennsylvania's Assembly cited the New York insurrection as the impetus for a new law that sought to limit "the Importation of Negroes and Indians into this Province."¹²⁰ Virginia, Rhode Island, and Connecticut followed suit, placing heavy duties on slaves to slow importation by British merchants.¹²¹ More than a decade after the New York revolt, the specter of enslaved Africans and Indians setting fire to homes in the night continued to haunt Massachusetts. In the spring of 1723, when Boston suffered a series of fires that consumed several houses, Massachusetts' Governor William Dummer issued a proclamation to the inhabitants of the city, claiming that the fires had been "designedly and industriously kindled by some villanous and desperate Negroes, or other

117. *Boston News-Letter*, April 7, 1712.

118. Kenneth Scott, "The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1961): 43–74.

119. Clark, *The Public Prints*, 84.

120. Darold D. Wax, "Negro Import Duties in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 1 (1973): 31–32.

121. Darold D. Wax, "Negro Import Duties in Colonial Virginia: A Study of British Commercial Policy and Local Public Policy," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 79, no. 1, pt. 1 (1971): 35.

dissolute People, as appears by the Confession of some of them." The governor "vehemently Suspected" that slaves had "entered into a wicked & horrid Combination to burn and destroy the said Town." Offering a reward for information leading to their arrest, he ordered the streets cleared and five guard towers constructed.¹²² These towers would face inward, to watch over the streets of the city and protect colonists from their resident slaves. The story of the New York insurrection thus ushered in a new genre of slave conspiracy reporting in the mainland colonies.¹²³

Between 1712 and 1738 Britain's Atlantic Empire experienced a sharp rise in the number of provincial newspapers. In an age when news could travel only as fast as a ship under sail, the dramatic expansion of shipping and trade between the colonies and the British Isles created a print culture organized for the sharing of news. When the English Parliament and King William III allowed the Licensing Act and prepublishing censorship to expire in 1695, English printers took full advantage.¹²⁴ By 1712 there were at least twenty newspapers operating in London alone. The volume of news and newspapers astounded the people of the time. In London the *British Mercury* complained of the "furious itch of Novelty" and the "immoderate Appetite for Intelligence" that had taken hold of London society.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, apprentices trained in these print shops sought new opportunities in far-off ports.¹²⁶ The *Boston News-Letter* was the only newspaper in Britain's North American colonies between 1704 and 1719, but in the latter year James Franklin produced the first edition of the *Boston Gazette*, and Andrew Bradford, in Philadelphia, began his *American Weekly Mercury*.¹²⁷ By 1736 fourteen printers published newspapers in seven British colonies (excluding

122. "Proclamation of Governor Dummer," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 14, no. 1 (1860): 36.

123. Bartholomew Green Sr. introduced the important innovation of reporting on provincial news, as well as on the latest news from Europe. He made this apparent when he became the sole proprietor of the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* in 1727, specifying that his paper would report the news "both Foreign and Domestick." Charles Clark credits Green's focus on local issues as an important turning point in local news in the history of the American press; Clark, *The Public Prints*, 211.

124. Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Press, 1987), 19.

125. *British Mercury*, August 2, 1712, as cited in Harris, *London Newspapers*, 155.

126. Harris, *London Newspapers*, 19–20.

127. David A. Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), 14–16.

the newspapers in Rhode Island and Maryland that had closed in 1733 and 1734).¹²⁸

These colonial printers took great interest in stories of slave unrest in the Americas. Mariners sailing southward returned with regular reports of open warfare between planters and “rebellious negroes” across the West Indies. In Jamaica the descendants of escaped slaves (later known to the British as Maroons) battled militias throughout the mountainous interior of the island, ultimately signing peace treaties in 1739 and 1740.¹²⁹ Benjamin Franklin printed thirteen separate stories about this conflict in his first six years of publishing the weekly *Pennsylvania Gazette*.¹³⁰ “Our rebellious Negroes are so numerous that they attack us every where,” Franklin reported in 1734, “and are not afraid of our greatest Force.”¹³¹ That same year slaves on Danish St. John rebelled together in the first islandwide slave insurrection in the Western Hemisphere.¹³² For more than nine months, New England printers reported the purported atrocities committed by slaves on the white planters of the island.¹³³ Their newspapers shared rumors of British slaves rising in solidarity with the St. John’s rebels, events that together “so alarmed our islands that they keep 30 or 40 men every night upon the watch . . . to prevent a surprise.”¹³⁴ Printers placed these accounts alongside stories of similar slave conspiracies in the mainland provinces of North America.

These news stories left many Britons with a shared sense of being besieged by rebelling slaves. In 1734 William Bradford printed a letter in his *New York Gazette* whose author claimed to have witnessed the interrogations of slave conspirators in East Jersey. After describing the purported

128. For a chronological list of newspapers and printers, see Clark, *The Public Prints*, 267–68.

129. Mavis Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655–1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration, and Betrayal* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1988), 2.

130. Justin Pope, “Dangerous Spirit of Liberty: Slave Rebellion, Conspiracy, and the First Great Awakening, 1729–1746” (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 2014), 252–53.

131. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 18, 1734.

132. Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies under Company Rule (1671–1754)* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 124–30.

133. *Boston News-Letter*, December 27, 1734.

134. Boston newspapers reported the slaves on Saint Christopher had been “encouraged” by the rebels of St. John to light homes on fire; *Boston News-Letter*, January 21–28, 1734, and March 7–14, 1734.

plot, the letter writer expressed his concern that slave rebellion was on the rise in the British Atlantic:

I would also have each and every one of us to remember, and not forget the great Calamity and Disolation there was in the City of New-York some years since, by the Negroes rising there, and murdering many good innocent People. . . . The late Massacre perpetrated by the Negroes in the Island of St. John's, the very great head they are come to in the Island of Jamaica, and the general Melancholy Apprehensions of his Majesty's Subjects in the West Indies, gives but too much room to fear there is some great Fatality attends the English Dominions in America, from the too great Number of that unchristian and barbarous People being imported.¹³⁵

This author drew on news of unrest from throughout the Americas to explain the growing danger to the "English Dominions in America." Reminding New York readers of the slave revolt of 1712 and the "Melancholy Apprehensions" of West Indian planters, he warned that slaves might soon deliver "some great Fatality" on their British masters. Britons on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean read the news and shared concerns about the restiveness of the slave population.¹³⁶

Like his contemporaries in Philadelphia and New York, Draper eagerly reported news of slave unrest in his paper. While still an apprentice, he printed a detailed account of a shipboard insurrection off of the coast of Africa in which "the Negroes rose, and making themselves Masters of the Gunpowder and Firearms," took control of the ship.¹³⁷ In 1733 the new owner of the *Boston News-Letter* focused his attention on the St. John Rebellion. He reported the insurrection had "encouraged the Negroes at St. Kitts, and the Week before last they attempted the same in that Island, by setting six Houses on Fire, but was prevented of their Design, by a Negro that had a peculiar Regard for his Master, who disclosed the Plot." According to Draper and other printers throughout Boston, the slaves on British St. Kitts wanted to set houses on fire in solidarity with rebels to the north.

135. *New-York Gazette*, March 18–25, 1734.

136. For London's response to news of slave unrest, see the debate over the origins of the Antigua conspiracy in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1, 1737. For the response of British officials to news of the Antigua conspiracy, see Edward Trelawny to Duke of Newcastle, London, June 30, 1737, CO 137/56, ff. 74–84v, Great Britain, Public Records Office, Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, vol. 43 (1737), item 379, 191–92.

137. *Boston News-Letter*, September 18–25, 1729, 1.

Only a loyal slave “that had a peculiar Regard for his Master” had disclosed the conspiracy in time to avert the attack.¹³⁸

Before 1738 Draper had focused most on the Antigua slave conspiracy. On November 25, 1736, he published an “Extract of a Letter from Antigua” in which his correspondent reported that “the island is in a very great confusion at present about the negroes rising in battle against us.” From November 1736 to April 1737, Draper followed up with several stories in which enslaved conspirators purportedly sought to blow up leading planters on the island in a gunpowder plot reminiscent of Guy Fawkes and that more famous Gunpowder Plot.¹³⁹ “We have given our Readers (in a former Paper) an Account of a Negro Plot in Antigua,” Draper explained in April 1737, “which was happily discover’d before it was put in Execution.” A letter from “a Gentleman in that Island,” mentioned a “Negro who had been Evidence,” warning his owner of a much deeper plot not yet discovered by the planters. The informant’s warning spurred a new round of interrogations and trials, and “As Providence would have it,” reported Draper, the slave had saved the colonists just in time.¹⁴⁰

On September 27, 1738, when Draper sat down to craft his account of the Nantucket Indian conspiracy, he thus could draw on many precedents for reporting servile insurrection from throughout the provinces. The story of the Nantucket Indian conspiracy that he produced for his *Boston News-Letter* reflected the influence of the slave conspiracies from his previous editions. “We hear from Nantucket,” he reported on September 28, 1738, “That there has been lately a horrid Scheme contriv’d by the Indians of that Island, to set Fire to the Houses of the English Inhabitants in the Night, and then to fall upon them arm’d, and kill as many as they could.” And true to the genre, Draper related that only one Indian had saved the white colonists of the island, where “the Execution of this vile Design was happily prevented by an honest Indian Fellow, whom they could by no means seduce to join.” But the rest of the report might describe more accurately the Nantucket sailors’ understandings of the conspiracy. “It seems these Indians have for some Time past appear’d surly and discontented,” the printer noted, “and ‘tis said the above Affair was concerted last Spring, before the Vessels sail’d on the whaling Voyages.” Amply aware of the

138. *Boston News-Letter*, February 28–March 7, 1734, 2.

139. For the Antigua conspiracy, see *Boston News-Letter*, November 25–December 2, 1736, 2; February 24–March 3, 1737, 1; March 10–17, 1737, 1; and April 1–8, 1737, 1.

140. *Boston News-Letter*, April 1–8, 1737, 1.

resentment of the Wampanoags, the Nantucket settlers feared “the Indians who went out with the English on those Voyages were in the Confederacy,” and, Draper continued, they “were to do their Part by destroying the English on the Seas.”¹⁴¹ His story reflected two decades of the *Boston News-Letter*’s printers reporting stories of slave plots from throughout the Atlantic world.

Draper’s version of the Nantucket conspiracy became the model for all the printers of Boston. Though there must have been other spoken versions of the Nantucket Indian conspiracy circulating throughout the city, his rivals chose the exact language of Draper’s *News-Letter* report for their own newspapers. Four days after the *News-Letter*’s publication, Draper’s rival John Boydell copied his conspiracy report verbatim in the *Boston Gazette*.¹⁴² A few days later, the printers Samuel Kneeland and Timothy Green also included Draper’s story word for word in their *New-England Weekly Journal*.¹⁴³ Meanwhile, Thomas Fleet’s *Boston Evening Post* copied the other editions but added an additional sentence explaining the Indian’s grievances. “As we hear,” Fleet explained, “the English at first took the Land from their Ancestors by Force, and have kept it ever since, without giving them any valuable Consideration for it.”¹⁴⁴ Despite his distance from Nantucket, Fleet knew of English transgressions against Native people on the island.

Through their subscribers, Draper and his fellow printers quickly spread the story of the Nantucket Indian conspiracy down the Post Road linking New England to New York. Within seventeen days of Draper’s publication of the story in Boston, the New York printer John Peter Zenger reprinted the *News-Letter*’s account in his *New-York Weekly Journal*.¹⁴⁵ The New York audience learned that Nantucket’s Wampanoags had “some time since” joined in a “conspiracy to destroy all the English,” first planning to burn down homes by cover of night, then to fall on the white inhabitants in the ensuing panic, in an account that must have seemed familiar to a generation of New Yorkers raised on stories of the New York rebellion.¹⁴⁶

Eleven days later, news of the conspiracy appeared for the first time in the publications of Philadelphia. A young Benjamin Franklin reproduced

141. *Boston News-Letter*, September 28–October 5, 1738, 2.

142. *Boston Gazette*, October 2–9 1738, 3.

143. *New-England Weekly Journal*, October 10, 1738, 2.

144. *Boston Evening Post*, October 9, 1738, 2.

145. *New-York Weekly Journal*, October 15, 1738.

146. *Boston Evening Post*, October 9, 1738.

the rumor in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*, copying Thomas Fleet's *Boston Evening Post* version and adding an observation about the wrongs committed by the English against Indian ancestors.¹⁴⁷ Like all the other mainland printers, Franklin took the news directly from the printed page. Draper's story made for good copy.

While colonists passed the printed version of the story south along the North American coast, mariners were also carrying the rumor across the Atlantic Ocean. Seventy days after Draper first published his version of the Nantucket Indian conspiracy, John Meres described the conspiracy in his *London Evening Post*.¹⁴⁸ His newspaper was "the most publick channel of conveyance through Great Britain," a publication read throughout the empire.¹⁴⁹ The *London Evening Post's* version of the Nantucket plot was reprinted verbatim in *Common Sense; or, The Englishman's Journal* and *Read's Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer* two days after the first report.¹⁵⁰

The London version had been copied from a letter written in Boston whose author had heard Draper's story read aloud from a newspaper and then shared it with a correspondent across the ocean. In his December 7 account, Meres dated the letter "October 9th," twelve days after the publication of the Nantucket story. Its author described the conspiracy as taking place "near Non-tucker," and reported the Indians had "enter'd into a Conspiracy to destroy all the English; but the Plot was discover'd by an Indian that would by no Means be prevail'd upon to join the rest of the Indians in this rebellious Undertaking." The "Non-Tucker" spelling of the island, of course, did not match the earlier newspaper accounts, suggesting the author had not read the printed copy, but at the same time, the letter writer's account of an honest Indian who "would by no Means be prevail'd upon to join the rest" closely matched Draper's version of the conspiracy.

While the story continued its march through the British Atlantic world, the news report took an unusual turn among the printers of Boston. One week after reprinting Draper's article, the *Boston Gazette* published a retraction. "The news that we had in the publick Prints," explained John Boydell, "that 16 Indians of the Island of Nantucket had lately a horrid Scheme

147. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 26, 1738.

148. *London Evening Post*, December 7, 1738.

149. *London Evening Post*, May 30–June 1, 1756; Bob Harris, "The *London Evening Post* and Mid-Eighteenth-century British Politics," *English Historical Review* 110, no. 439 (1995): 1132.

150. *Common Sense; or, The Englishman's Journal* (London), December 9, 1738; *Read's Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer* (London), December 9, 1738.

contriv'd to set Fire to the Houses of the English Inhabitants in the Night, and kill as many as they could, is wholly contradicted by a Vessel that arrived here a few Days ago." A sailor from Nantucket had challenged Draper's description of events. "This Report arose by a drunken Indian Woman of that Island being in Liquor reported such Things," Boydell continued, "and she and another Indian Woman was brought before a Justice of the Peace and examin'd, and could make nothing of it but a drunken Story."¹⁵¹ The *Boston Gazette* account completely contradicted Draper's account of an "honest Indian fellow" saving the English on the island. This retraction was ignored by all the other printers of Boston, but two newspapermen in other cities took note. Benjamin Franklin copied the account of the "drunken Indian woman" into his *Pennsylvania Gazette*.¹⁵² Months later, the London *Daily Gazetteer* did the same, reprinting Boydell's retraction of the conspiracy verbatim.¹⁵³

Thomas Fleet further complicated the story. Four weeks after the first publication of the Nantucket conspiracy, his *Boston Evening Post* included a letter from Rhode Island that expressed resentment at the idea that the conspiracy scare was "just a drunken story." The author of the letter intimated he had heard "from a Gentleman of good Credit at Nantucket" that the Indians had held suspicious meetings in the night and "that an Indian named Isaac was the principal Author" of the conspiracy.¹⁵⁴ No newspapers responded to this claim, however.

By the last days of 1738, the printers of Boston had shared a fabricated story of Indian rebellion with tens of thousands of Britons on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The *Boston News-Letter's* tradition of reporting rebellion and conspiracy had served Draper well. He had fashioned a version of the rumor that resembled the New York revolt of 1712 and described an "honest" Indian who closely resembled the loyal slave informant from other stories of conspiracy. His version had traveled across five provinces, appeared in eleven newspapers, and even found a place in the London press. At a time when stories of slave unrest were of great concern to provincial Britons, the printers of Boston had contributed their own account of rebellion in the Atlantic world.

151. *Boston Gazette*, October 9–16, 1738, 3.

152. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 2, 1738.

153. *Daily Gazetteer* (London), December 13, 1738.

154. *Boston Evening Post*, October 23, 1738, 2.

In the days that followed the conspiracy scare on Nantucket, the English sought to make an example of the Native person who had started the false rumor. After all, the colonists had nearly attacked and murdered a sleeping village of “praying Indians,” so perhaps the English were embarrassed by how easily a “drunken story” had inspired terror and alarm in their community. The letter “from a Gentleman of good Credit at Nantucket” hinted at the colonists’ concern for their reputation.¹⁵⁵ The authorities did not keep a record of the arrest and trial of the Indian they blamed for instigating the conspiracy, nor did they document the punishment they inflicted on the informant. But their children remembered.

In the early nineteenth century an elderly Nantucket woman told eight-year-old Eliza Mitchell a story about an Indian she had once seen publicly whipped in the town common.¹⁵⁶ “For three days he had been stupefied with Liquor,” the old woman remembered, “procured with the money given him for the News he had brought of the intended raid on the whites.”¹⁵⁷ The English elders of the town decided “30 Lashes should be inflicted” on the informant for spreading the false rumor. The Quakers “felt averse to having any one again punish’d at the Whipping Post,” the elderly woman explained to the little girl, but Wampanoag sachems had insisted on the punishment.¹⁵⁸ The Indians had “found who the culprit was, & were so highly incensed toward him, they came near tearing him to pieces.”¹⁵⁹ The English ordered the Indian tied to the town post and whipped before the entire community.

The Nantucket conspiracy scare ended like similar panics throughout the Americas. Colonists performed public violence on a Native person as an act of intimidation. It is quite possible the person they whipped was the “Drunken Indian woman” described in the *Boston Gazette*. Eliza Mitchell’s account described a man at the whipping post, but the English whipped more Indian women than men in the decade before the rumor of revolt. In 1726 authorities lashed “Damarie an Indian girl” for theft.¹⁶⁰ They whipped “Zephaniah an Indian” and her enslaved black partner Primus for stealing

155. *Ibid.*

156. This account is also related by the historian Nathaniel Philbrick in “The Whipping Post,” 105–7.

157. Mitchell, “Personal Reminiscences,” NHS.

158. *Ibid.*

159. *Ibid.*

160. Trials concerning Indians, folder 1, p. 39, Court of Sessions, October 4, 1726, NHS.

beans and meat.¹⁶¹ In 1727 the sheriff “severely whipp’d” an Indian girl named Dorcas for freeing an imprisoned Wampanoag man from jail.¹⁶² Perhaps the Nantucket English did not want to remember this last act of publicly whipping a woman. Or perhaps they blamed a Native man at the end of their investigation and chose to whip him instead. For her part, the elderly woman remembered the town elders lessening the number of lashes, though the whipping was “brutal enough.” It was a memory she would pass to future generations. Standing as a little girl beside her elders, she had been part of an important ritual in colonial America: the public punishment of a subaltern person involved in a conspiracy scare.

The printed newspaper accounts left behind their own legacy. Nearly one hundred years after colonists disavowed the rumor, the Nantucket historian Obed Macy remembered the Wampanoags as “so bold as to threaten the English with total annihilation.”¹⁶³ Forty years later, in his classic *History of the American Whale Fishery* (1878), Alexander Starbuck relied on Draper’s article to remember “the Indian plot” on Nantucket.¹⁶⁴ And in 2000, 262 years after the printer of the *Boston News-Letter* first mailed his story down the Old Post Road, the historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker incorporated the newspaper’s account of the conspiracy into their list of Atlantic-wide insurrections of the 1730s. In *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the Wampanoags became part of a “motley proletariat,” a combination of slaves and sailors, Irish servants and pirates, determined to thwart the forces of early modern capitalism.¹⁶⁵ Draper’s sensational story has persisted across the centuries.

The Nantucket conspiracy scare of 1738 was an invention. It was a rumor born of the English exploitation of Native people on the island. Colonists took advantage of the Wampanoags’ poverty and indebtedness to coerce Indians into labor aboard deep-sea whaling vessels. One Wampanoag’s drunken ramblings about rebellion terrified the settlers of Nantucket and sent their entire community into a panic. The Boston printer John Draper then transformed the unfounded fears of the island’s colonists into sensational news, an account of imminent rebellion that traveled the breadth of the British Atlantic world and that would be recalled and recounted in the histories of the island.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

162. Trials concerning Indians, folder 1, p. 48, Court of Sessions, October 3, 1727, NHS.

163. Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 48.

164. Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery*, 24.

165. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 193.

And British colonial newspapers would continue to tell sensational stories of similar conspiracy scares. As they had with the rumor of revolt on Nantucket, printers found new and better opportunities to publish fresh accounts of imminent rebellion. Such was the case two years later, when a young white servant girl in New York accused her master and slaves of plotting a vast conspiracy. She claimed the slaves had said that “when they set fire to the Town, they would do it in the Night, and as the white People came to extinguish it, they would kill and destroy them.”¹⁶⁶ In September 1738 Boston printers had falsely accused the Nantucket Wampanoags of an identical “horrid” plot.

166. Daniel Horsmanden, *Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants* (New York: James Parker, 1744), 13.